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For Immediate Release

FCC ADOPTS RULES FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS TO RURAL HEALTH CARE PROGRAM

Program Helps Support Telehealth and Telemedicine Services in Rural Areas

WASHINGTON, December 13, 2023—The Federal Communications Commission today adopted rules making multiple improvements to the Rural Health Care (RHC) Program, which helps rural health care providers afford the broadband connectivity needed for telehealth and telemedicine services. Today’s action will improve program administration and increase participation by allowing health care providers that expect to become eligible in the near future to request funding sooner, aligning program deadlines, simplifying rules for calculating urban rates, streamlining administrative processes, and freeing up unused funding for other purposes.

The RHC Program provides vital support to assist rural health care providers with the costs of broadband and other eligible services. By offering discounted rates for these services, the RHC Program enables health care providers to better treat patients in rural areas that often have fewer medical resources and higher service rates than in urban areas. Broadband-enabled telehealth and telemedicine in particular have proven to be critical tools for the effective delivery of health care to millions of patients across rural America, as demonstrated by the heightened dependency on these services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically, today’s Report and Order will permit conditional approval of eligibility for health care providers that expect to be eligible in the near future to allow them to initiate competitive bidding and request funding; align the Service Provider Identification Number change deadline with the invoice deadline; simplify the rules for calculating urban rates for the Telecommunications Program by eliminating the seldom-used “standard urban distance” component of the rule that determines urban rates; and allow health care providers to request updates to time periods covered by a competitive bidding exemption to reflect the actual start and end dates of multi-year contracts.

In addition to these changes, today’s action will also make two programmatic improvements to program administration to harmonize RHC Program eligibility determination and free up unclaimed funding. This includes shifting to the use of a single universal eligibility form for all program participants. It also includes establishing a deadline for health care providers to submit invoices for any undisbursed funding commitments without an applicable invoice deadline, which would free up for other uses up to \$22.2 million in unclaimed RHC Program support from funding year 2019 and prior years.

Action by the Commission December 13, 2023 by Third Report and Order (FCC 23-110). Chairwoman Rosenworcel, Commissioners Carr, Starks, Simington, and Gomez approving. Chairwoman Rosenworcel issuing a separate statement.

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This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action. See MCI v. FCC, 515 F.2d 385 (D.C. Cir. 1974).